ENGLISH ORAL COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS AND STRATEGIES USED BY

THAI EMPLOYEES IN AN INTERNATIONAL WORKPLACE TO COMMUNICATE

WITH NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING CUSTOMERS

A THESIS

BY

FATIMAH JEHARSAE

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Master of Arts in English

at Srinakharinwirot University

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AN ABSTRACT

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Fatimah Jeharsae. (2012). *English Oral Communication Problems and Strategies Used by Thai Employees in an International Workplace to Communicate with Native and Non-Native English Speaking Customers*. Thesis, M.A. (English). Bangkok: Graduate School, Srinakharinwirot University. Thesis Advisor: Assistant Professor Dr. Saiwaroon Chumpavan.

This study aimed to investigate the English oral communication problems and strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with native and non-native English speaking customers in an international workplace. It also aimed to see whether there was any significant difference between the strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with native English speaking customers and those used by Thai employees to communicate with non native English speaking customers. The participants in this study were 194 Thai employees working in the international customer service department in an American company based in Bangkok, Thailand. The instrument employed in this study was a survey questionnaire. It was found that Thai employees communicating with native English speaking customers had problems with (a) listening comprehension and (b) grammar usage. Conversely, Thai employees communicating with non-native English speaking customers had a variety of problems with (a) listening comprehension, (b) grammar usage, (c) fluency, (d) accents, (e) producing word stress misplacement, (f) cultural awareness, and (g) quality of voice. The results also showed that the major common oral communication strategies used by both groups of employees were (a) asking customers directly of what they did not get, (b) making clarification requests, (c) paraphrasing, and (d) generalization. Moreover, it was found that there was no significant difference between the strategies used by both groups of employees.

ปัญหาและกลวิธีในการพูดภาษาอังกฤษของพนักงานไทยในสถานประกอบการนานาชาติที่ต้อง
สื่อสารกับลูกค้าที่พูดภาษาอังฤษ และไม่พูดภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่หนึ่ง

บทคัดย่อ
ของ
ฟาตีเม๊าะห์ เจ๊ะอาแซ

เสนอต่อบัณฑิตวิทยาลัย มหาวิทยาลัยศรีนครินทรวิโรฒ เพื่อเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษา
ตามหลักสูตรปริญญาศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต สาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษ
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    ประกอบการนานาชาติที่ต้องสื่อสารกับลูกค้าที่พูดภาษาอังฤษ และไม่พูดภาษาอังกฤษเป็น
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        การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจปัญหาและกลวิธีในการพูดภาษาอังกฤษของพนักงาน
ไทยในสถานประกอบการนานาชาติ ที่ต้องสื่อสารกับลูกค้าที่พูดภาษาอังฤษและไม่พูดภาษาอังกฤษ
เป็นภาษาที่หนึ่ง นอกจากนี้งานวิจัยนี้ยังสำรวจค่าความแตกต่างของกลวิธีที่ใช้ในการแก้ปัญหาการ
พูดภาษาอังกฤษของทั้งสองกลุ่มว่ามีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติหรือไม่ กลุ่มตัวอย่างในงานวิจัยนี้คือ
พนักงานไทยในแผนกบริการลูกค้านานาชาติจำนวน 194 คน แบ่งเป็น 2 กลุ่ม คือ (1) พนักงาน
ไทยที่รับผิดชอบลูกค้าชาวต่างชาติที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่หนึ่ง และ (2) คือ พนักงานไทยที่
รับผิดชอบลูกค้าชาวต่างชาติที่ไม่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่หนึ่ง เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการวิจัยนี้ คือ
แบบสอบถามให้พนักงานประเมินปัญหาและกลวิธีที่ใช้ในการแก้ปัญหาการพูดภาษาอังกฤษของตน
        จากการศึกษาพบว่าพนักงานไทยที่รับผิดชอบลูกค้าชาวต่างชาติที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็น
ภาษาที่หนึ่งประสบปัญหาหลักในด้านการฟังและไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษเท่านั้น ในขณะที่พนักงาน
ไทยที่รับผิดชอบลูกค้าชาวต่างชาติที่ไม่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่หนึ่งนั้น ประสบปัญหา
หลากหลายกว่า อาทิเช่น ปัญหาการฟัง การใช้ไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษไม่ถูกต้อง การพูดไม่คล่อง
การไม่เข้าใจสำเนียงภาษาอังกฤษของชาวต่างชาติ และการออกเสียงภาษาอังกฤษ
        แต่อย่างไรก็ตามจากศึกษายังพบว่าพนักงานทั้งสองกลุ่มใช้กลวิธีในการแก้ปัญหา
ภาษาอังกฤษที่ค่อนข้างเหมือนกัน อาทิ เช่น การถามลูกค้าโดยตรง การขอคำอธิบายเพิ่มเติม การ
ถอดความ และการใช้คำที่มีความหมายกว้าง ๆ นอกจากนี้ยังพบว่าการใช้กลวิธีในการแก้ปัญหาการ
พูดภาษาอังกฤษของทั้งสองกลุ่มนั้นมีความคล้ายคลึงกัน และไม่มีความแตกต่างที่เป็นนัยสำคัญทาง
สถิติ

The thesis titled

"English Oral Communication Problems and Strategies Used by Thai Employees in an

International Workplace to Communicate with Native and Non-Native English Speaking

Customers"

by

Fatimah Jeharsae

has been approved by the Graduate School as partial fulfillment of the requirements for

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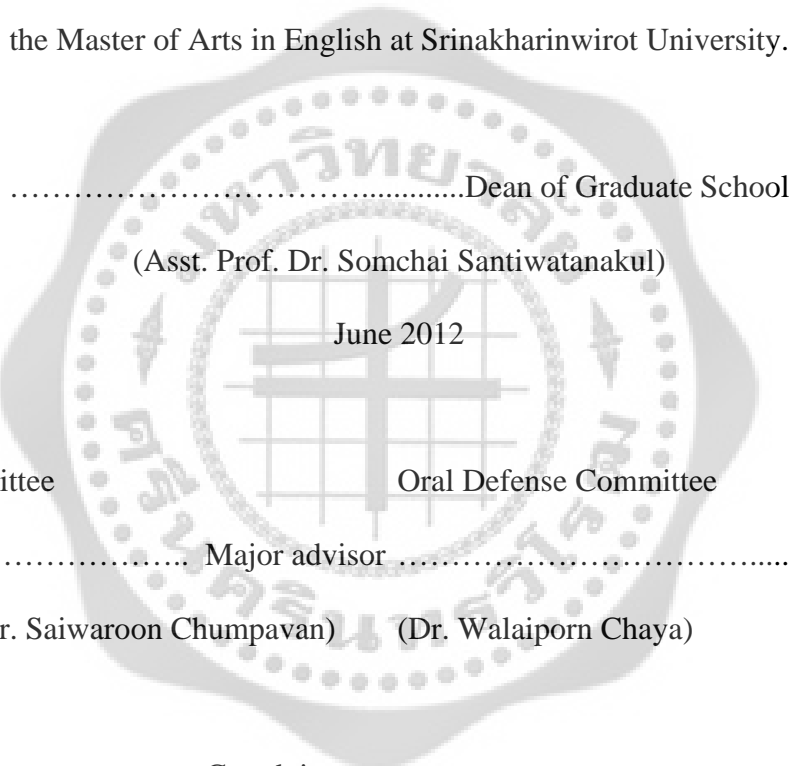
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June 2012

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM AND ITS BACKGROUND

Introduction

English is the mother tongue of millions of people around the world, the second language of millions more in Africa and Asia, and the acknowledged international language of science, technology, business, and diplomacy. About a quarter of the world's population is fluent or competent in English (Crystal, 2004). In addition, English is the most widely taught, read, and spoken language in the world. It has become accepted as the universal language and the language of international communication (Boonkit, 2010; Hurn, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Nickerson, 2005). Furthermore, in the roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009-2015, English is promoted as the international business language and the standard workplace language for ASEAN countries. One ASEAN development plan is to help ASEAN member nations to become proficient in English in order to establish a common language for members to communicate directly with one another, as well as being able to participate at an international level. Also, current employment requirements often include some degree of fluency in English in order to support the international needs of the company. This is especially true in a multilingual workplace, where almost all communication takes place in English. Therefore, superior English communication skills are the prime requisite for obtaining and holding a good job, as well as advancing to a better position in the contemporary business world (Marylin, 2006).

With the high demand for English in business communications and as a response to the ASEAN development roadmap, Thai employees, especially those who work in international workplaces, need to have good English proficiency, especially in oral

communication. Also, there is a high demand for graduates who have proficient oral communication skills as they can function more effectively in the modern workplace (Ali & Kassim, 2010; Hua & Kuar, 2007). Employees will be at a distinct disadvantage if they lack strong oral communication skills (Crosling & Ward, 2002). Additionally, in the business context, there is a need for business workers to spend much more time talking and listening to colleagues and clients rather than writing and reading (Taylor, 2005). Apparently, competent English oral communication skills can be a passport to success in an international workplace (Srisudaporn, 2006).

In addition, the importance of English oral communication skills for those who seek to gain employment or career advancement is well documented. Several studies (Boonkit, 2010; Crosling & Ward, 2002; Forey & Lockwood, 2007; Seong, 2007; Sutthawatsunthorn, 2004; Vasavakul, 2006) confirm that English oral communication skills are considered to be the most important competency in evaluating entry-level job candidates. Also, these skills are thought to be the most critical attribute for career and managerial success (Sutthawatsunthorn, 2004).

English oral communication problems of non-native English speakers.

Effective English oral communication in the workplace can be a major problem for employees who are not native English speakers, such as Thai employees, as English is not their mother tongue. Moreover, effective English oral communication can be a serious problem for those who have insufficient English knowledge, limited experience with English, or limited exposure to English interaction. Hence, English speaking or oral communication in English is considered difficult for non-native English speakers as English is not their mother tongue (Khamkhien, 2010; Myers, Penrase, & Rasberry, 2000).

Bloch and Starks (1999) found that the four main problems of non-native English speakers with English communication were (a) listening comprehension, (b) poor or

insufficient vocabulary and use of idioms, (c) distortion or misunderstanding of the message, and (d) inappropriate formulation of the message. Forey and Lockwood (2007) found that the main problem for non-native English employees who worked as call agents were limited grammatical knowledge and poor or incorrect English pronunciation. Additionally, these problems were caused by a failure to understand a complex text, non-fluency in the interaction, and a lack of awareness of the country and the cultural background of their customers (Forey & Lockwood, 2007).

In Thailand, several studies have confirmed that English oral communication skills are the most desirable quality for Thai employees, especially those who interact with foreign customers. However, Thai speakers seem to encounter various difficulties or problems with oral English communication, as mentioned in several studies. For instance, Meemak (2002) found that Thai Tourist Police officers had limited vocabulary and could not express their ideas coherently and correctly. Jaisutthi (2006) mentioned that the greatest barriers to effective oral communication for hotel front office staff were listening abilities, a lack of vocabulary, and problems with word choice. Aungcharoen (2006) indicated that Thai speakers of English had difficulties with oral communication, especially pronunciation and word stress misplacement.

Moreover, according to Vasavakul (2006), and Tipmontree (2007), the problems found from their studies on the oral communication skills of the Thai staff who communicated with foreign customers were (a) a lack of understanding of the questions asked, which required a lot of repetition from the interviewer, (b) long pauses during conversations, (c) low fluency, (d) poor English grammar, (e) misunderstanding the foreign accents, and (d) low confidence and nervousness when speaking due to the lack of opportunity to practice English. In addition, according to Boonkit (2010), despite the fact that most Thai students have studied English for almost ten years before entering

university, many of them lack confidence and find communicating with foreigners to be a major problem. The findings of Boonkit's study revealed that the main problems among Thais were with pronunciation and the grammatical structure of English sentences.

It can be concluded that many non-native English people seem to have difficulties with English oral communication. Such problems with communication or communication breakdowns in English interactions may not be related to just discrete grammatical features or the accents of the speakers. The problem seems to be more about general communicative competence and confidence in speaking than any other factors. Based on the aforementioned studies related to problems with English oral communication, the main problems can be classified as (a) pronunciation, (b) grammar, (c) vocabulary, (d) comprehension, (e) English accents, (f) fluency, (g) cultural awareness, and (h) self-confidence.

Oral communication strategies.

Basically, the main purpose of oral communication is for the speaker to successfully transmit an intended message to the listener. However, in a situation where the message sender and the message receiver have different native languages, it may be very difficult to achieve their communicative goal (Somsai & Intaraprasert, 2011). As a result, communication strategies are often used by communicators to deal with communication problems, especially while speaking. This is due to their limited knowledge or restrictions in the use of language knowledge in a particular setting (Savignon, 1983). Besides, communication strategies are often used to enhance the effectiveness of communication even if there is no problem or difficulty involved in an oral communication (Bygate, 2002).

According to Savignon (1983), communication strategies are techniques used to sustain communication. These strategies include paraphrasing, circumlocution (a

roundabout expression or indirect way of speaking), asking for repetition or emphasis, seeking clarification, and avoidance of words, structures, or topics. These strategies are used to meet the demands of ongoing communication.

In addition, according to Kirkpatrick (2007), communication strategies are used to ensure collaborative communication among those who consider themselves multilingual and who have learned English as a second or foreign language. Additionally, the strategies are aimed to ensure communication and to preserve the face of the participants. The adoption of communicative strategies is also to ensure smooth communication between the speaker and the listener.

Furthermore, Huang (2010) concluded that communication strategies could be classified into two types. The first was avoidance or reduction strategies, which included, for example, topic avoidance, message abandonment, or meaning replacement. The second type was achievement or compensatory strategies, which included, for instance, appeal for help, code switching, literal translation, substitution by first language, generalization, or word coinage.

Similarly, according to Somsai and Intaraprasert (2011), communication strategies could be classified into two types; achievement and avoidance strategies. Achievement or compensatory strategies were employed to deal directly with communication problems by using alternative choices to get the message across. Achievement strategies included, for example, word coinage, language switching, paraphrasing, or an appeal for help. The second strategy was avoidance or reduction strategies, which included topic avoidance or message abandonment. These strategies were employed to change, replace, or reduce the content of the intended message so that the communication could run smoothly.

To conclude, communication strategies are useful techniques for coping with difficulties in oral communication, especially for those whose English is as a second or a

foreign language. Additionally, communication strategies refer to devices or techniques employed by communicators either to solve communication problems or to enhance their communicative effectiveness. The adoption of communication strategies ensures smooth communication between the speaker and the listener. This is because smooth and collaborative communication is another main communicative goal (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

Obviously, in an international business environment, it is essential for employees to have a high level of English proficiency, especially oral communication skills. Also, it is strongly confirmed by Forey and Lockwood (2007) that non-native English speakers working as agents in a call center context had problems communicating in English. Although there have been many research studies on Business English and some studies on English business discourse, studies investigating problems with customer service interaction in an international workplace in Thailand are still limited. Moreover, there is no known study investigating the English oral communication difficulties experienced by Thai customer-service employees working in international petroleum companies.

Therefore, this study was designed to investigate the English oral communication problems and strategies used by Thai employees working in the customer service department in an international petroleum company based in Bangkok, Thailand to communicate with native and non-native English speaking customers. In addition, this study attempted to discover whether or not there was a significant difference between the strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with native English speaking customers and non-native English speaking customers. Consequently, the results from the study can be implications for speakers or learners who need to improve their own English proficiency and for the organization to design an effective English training course for their employees.

Research Questions

The following research questions were posted in this study.

1. What were the English oral communication problems encountered by Thai employees who communicated with native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

2. What were the English oral communication problems encountered by Thai employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

3. What were the strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

4. What were the strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with non-native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

5. Was there a significant difference between the strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with native English speaking customers and non-native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

Significance of the Study

This study aimed to investigate the English oral communication problems and strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with native and non-native English speaking customers in an international petroleum company based in Bangkok, Thailand. In addition, this study attempted to discover whether or not there was a significant difference between the strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with both native English speaking customers and non-native English speaking customers. Therefore, the findings of this study could be useful to both companies and employees in order to identify the exact and existing problems with English oral communication as experienced by Thai employees in an international workplace.

In addition, the results of the study could be helpful for the management team in terms of setting up training courses or programs that cater to the problems experienced by employees. This can lead to enhanced proficiency in English oral communication among Thai employees in an international business environment. Also, this study may also reveal the ways in which the Thai public and private sectors can prepare their staff to be qualified, competent, and well-prepared in order to compete in the challenges of the regional integration of ASEAN policy and at a broader international level.

Methodology

Selection of the company.

There are four major reasons why the targeted company was selected. Firstly, the targeted company is the world's largest multinational oil and gas corporation and has branches around the world in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific region, which is appropriate for this study as it is an international workplace. Secondly, the company set up the Bangkok Business Support Center in Thailand to provide support to customers from both native English speaking countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, and to those from non-native English speaking countries, such as Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan. Next, as an international company, the language used throughout the company is English, while the majority of customer-service employees in Bangkok are Thais, who do not speak English as their first language. Finally, the researcher had been working with this company for over six years; therefore, it was convenient to collect data and worthwhile to study the problems of English oral communication in an international setting at this company in order to provide feedback to the company training team.

Selection of the participants.

The participants in this study were 194 Thai employees in the Fuels Marketing Customer Service department, responsible for customers from both native English speaking countries and non-native English speaking countries. The participants were categorized into two groups. The first group consisted of the employees who were responsible for communicating with native English speaking customers, while the second group was responsible for communicating with non-native English speaking customers. The native English speaking customers were from native English speaking countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. The non-native English speaking customers were from non-native English speaking countries, including Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan.

Instrumentation.

The key instrument in this research study was a survey questionnaire developed by the researcher. The survey questionnaire included both close-ended and open-ended questions, which were self-administered by the participants. The participants were asked about their English oral communication problems and the communication strategies they used when they encountered problems during conversations or did not understand foreign customers.

The close-ended questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part I aimed to gather the background information of the participants. Part II was concerned with their English ability while communicating with their foreign customers. Part III asked about the strategies they used to overcome the problems they experienced during conversations with foreign customers. The participants were asked to rate their problems and the strategies they used to overcome these problems by choosing one of five items on a Likert scale – strongly agree, agree, moderately agree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

An open-ended questionnaire was added to Part II and III to gather more in-depth information on the English oral communication problems encountered by the employees and the strategies they used during communication with foreign customers. In this part, the participants had the opportunity to provide their ideas and opinions, which were not mentioned in the closed-ended questions.

Pilot study.

The thesis advisor was asked to examine the content of the questionnaire and agreed that it was valid and appropriate to use in this study. The questionnaire was pilot tested with three different departments: the Retail Support Department, the Chemical Customer Service Department, and the Human Resources Department during January 2012. The purpose of the pilot test was to check for clarity of the language and content, establish an appropriate time for completion, and see if revision of the whole questionnaire would be needed for the actual test (Mc Millan & Schumacher, 2009). In addition, the Cronbach's alpha, the most common measure of internal consistency of multiple Likert questions in a survey/questionnaire, was also used to determine if the scale of the questionnaire was reliable prior to the actual study (Wikipedia, 2012). It was found that the reliability of the questionnaire was at 0.90; therefore, it was acceptable to be used as a research instrument of this study.

Data collection procedures.

The data for this study was obtained from the close-ended and open-ended questionnaire. The researcher asked for and received permission from the Customer Service Department manager to conduct this research study. The questionnaire was given to all participants in February 2012.

All participants were given two weeks to complete the questionnaire. A letter asking for participation, a cover letter providing information about the study and the researcher's contact information was sent to participants together with the questionnaires.

Data analysis.

The researcher analyzed the data obtained from the questionnaire to answer five research questions. The results of the questionnaire were interpreted, categorized, and tabulated on computer sheets and were presented in tables and figures together with full explanations of descriptive analysis. The results were also calculated into statistical values as follows:

1. The data concerning the general background was presented in percentages.

2. The Cronbach's alpha (α) measurement was used to determine if the scale of the questionnaire was reliable prior to the actual study.

3. A five-point Likert scale was used to score the participant's level of agreement in terms of their English oral communication problems and strategies used to communicate with foreign customers.

4. The mean score (M) was used to interpret the average level of the participant's problems with and the strategies used during oral English communication. The items with higher mean scores indicated a higher level of problems with English communication in the international workplace and an increased use of strategies to overcome them. On the other hand, a lower mean score indicated fewer problems with oral communication and the use of fewer strategies.

5. The t-test was used to investigate if there was a significance difference between the strategies used by both groups of Thai employees.

Limitations of the Study

This study only focused on the English oral communication problems faced by Thai customer service employees in an unnamed international company based in Bangkok. This study was also limited to employees in an international workplace who were willing to participate. Hence, these findings are limited to one context and may not be applicable to another company or in a different context.

Confidentiality of the Participants and Their Responses

The participants were not asked to identify themselves on the questionnaire. The researcher assigned a number for each participant. The participants were informed that their personal information would be kept strictly confidential and would be destroyed immediately after the completion of the study. The participants were also invited to contact the researcher if they had any enquiry.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are specifically defined in this study:

1. Native English speaking customers

Based on Krachuc's three-circle model of World Englishes, native English speaking customers in this study refer to foreign customers who are from inner circle countries, where English is used as a mother tongue by the majority of speakers (Bloomer, Patrick, & Merrison, 2006). This group of native English speaking countries includes the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. These customers speak English as their mother tongue.

2. Non-native English speaking customers

Based on Krachuc's three-circle model of World Englishes, non-native English speaking customers in this study refer to foreign customers who are from outer circle countries, in which English is used as the major institutional language, and

expanding circle countries, in which English is used for international business rather than for internal communications (Bloomer, Patrick, & Merrison, 2006). These groups are known as non-native English speaking countries and include, for example, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Thailand, Hong Kong, and China. These customers speak English as their second or foreign language.

3. Customer-service employees

    Customer-service employees are the participants of this study and consist of local Thai employees working for an international company in the Customer Service Department, generally known as a 'call center.' They provide services to local and foreign customers over the phone. The main functions of the job are answering questions, providing information, taking orders, facilitating requests, and handling enquiries and complaints.

4. The international workplace

    The international workplace in this study refers to a foreign company that has set up at least one business support center in Thailand to provide services to both Thai and foreign customers who are located in their own countries. The main language employed throughout the company is English.

Organization of the Study

    Chapter I of this study presents the background and research questions of the study. Chapter II presents a review of the literature. Chapter III is concerned with methodology. Chapter IV reports the findings, and Chapter V contains a conclusion and discussion of the findings and recommendations for further studies.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This study is an investigation of the English oral communication problems of Thai employees in the international workplace. It also aims to examine the English oral communication strategies used by Thai employees who support native English speaking and non-native English speaking customers. Consequently, some of the related literature and research were reviewed to obtain sufficient background knowledge for the study. The topics reviewed in this chapter are the importance of English oral communication in the workplace, effective oral communication skills, problems with English oral communication, and oral communication strategies.

The Importance of English Oral Communication in the Workplace

As the world develops into a global network, many international organizations are increasingly interested in hiring people with good English speaking skills, and effective English oral communication will give an employee an extra opportunity to gain competitive advantage (Ellen, 2001). The importance of English oral communication skills for those seeking employment or career advancement is well documented. Several studies (Boonkit, 2010; Crosling & Ward, 2002; Forey & Lockwood, 2007; Seong, 2007; Sutthawatsunthorn, 2004; Vasavakul, 2006) confirm that English oral communication skills are considered to be the most important competency in evaluating entry-level job candidates and the most critical attribute for all career and managerial success.

According to Murphy (2000), effective oral communication is the life blood of every organization. In the business field, the ability to communicate effectively is essential and significantly influences promotion to the executive level. An employee who cannot

communicate effectively remains buried in lower, dead-end jobs. Moreover, effective

oral communication also helps individuals to better accomplish certain goals.

In the customer service field, Harris (2000) emphasized that customer service

depends on the ability to communicate effectively. Also, listening and speaking skills are

the most significant communicative tools among the five main methods of

communication used in effective customer service interaction, which include listening,

speaking, writing, reading, and non-verbal expression. Hence, customer service agents

must continue to improve their communication skills in order to be successful in their

careers.

In a study of English oral communication skills in an undergraduate business and

commerce curriculum, Crosling and Ward (2002) indicated that English oral

communication skills were crucial in the workplace. Employees in this field required

effective communication skills if they wanted to be successful. The employees with the

best English oral communication skills were the most valuable. On the other hand, if

employees lacked this core skill, they were at a disadvantage. Moreover, in a study

investigating the development of English and communication skills for modern engineers

conducted by Riemer (2002), the results indicated that English communication skills were

essential for any engineer who aspired to carry out his or her professional practice in the

international marketplace. The results of the study also indicated that to prepare

engineers for industrial demand, they should be trained to use all four English language

skills, especially listening and speaking, in order to communicate effectively in the global

business environment.

Additionally, English oral communication skills play an important role in the tourist

industry. Seong (2007) conducted a study focusing on English for tourism and found that

English oral communication skills were the most valuable as it was a direct means of

communication with foreign visitors. Seong also suggested that learners needed to be actively involved in language learning in order to increase the amount of utterances, their level of understanding of the meaning of a conversation, grammar modification, negotiation, and providing feedback.

Hua and Kuar (2007) conducted a study to analyze oral communication needs among English for Information Technology (IT) graduates. It was found that besides the basic skills of reading and writing, effective oral communication skills were all additional skills required in IT jobs. These skills were also important for recruiting personnel, fostering career success, and enhancing the quality of one's life. In addition, there was a need to prepare IT graduates with effective English oral communication skills in order to compete in the international job market.

Hua and Kuar (2007) also added that effective oral communication skills were vital to business people, especially those who hold managerial positions because managers need to listen, explain, persuade, guide, coach, encourage, facilitate, and direct group members to meet the goals of individuals and their organizations. Effective oral communication enabled individuals to be understood. It also helped create understanding between people and fostered good relationships among workers in any business context.

In the call center context, English oral communication is not only seen as the heart of call center operations, but also as a crucial element for success in this field. The quality of call center professionals will greatly affect the ability of an organization to offer competitive services in the global economy. An improvement in the quality of communication and an increase in the standard of English are both factors that help to maintain and enhance the status of non-native English speaking call center agents to an international level (Forey & Lockwood, 2007).

In Thailand, the significance of English communication is also supported by the study conducted by Sutthawatsunthorn (2004) regarding the English skills required for engineers at Thai Airways. The participants consisted of 60 engineers employed at Thai Airways International Public Company Limited. The results of the study clearly revealed that the engineers needed to be proficient in English in order to communicate effectively. Sutthawatsunthorn emphasized that the ability to communicate efficiently in English was key to an individual success, career advancement and an establishment of a successful organization.

The significance of English communication is further supported by the study conducted by Vasavakul (2006), who used a questionnaire and an interview to gather information in order to design English for Business Purposes training courses with a focus on the needs of employees. The customer-service staff at international banks in Thailand participated in this study. The findings showed that speaking and listening were considered to be the most desirable skills and that speaking and listening skills were rated by staff as being more difficult than reading and writing.

Similarly, Jaisutthi (2006) also found that English speaking skills were vitally important and played a crucial part in the duties of front office hotel staff. Because the main responsibility of the front office staff involves customer service activities, answering the telephone and problem solving, the staff should have good English speaking skills. Therefore, Jaisutthi suggested that if hotel front office staff were competent and highly proficient in English, they would be confident in providing good services and making a good impression on guests.

Furthermore, according to Khamkhien (2010), the demand for staff with English skills is connected to the importance of the English language in both local and global contexts. The importance of English also sparks a growing interest in the teaching of

English as a foreign language (EFL) in Thailand as well. In order to meet the demands of globalization, new initiatives have been launched throughout the Thai educational system, including curriculum design, materials, facilities, and professional development opportunities for teachers (Khamkhien, 2010).

Boonkit (2010) also mentioned that speaking was one of the four skills necessary for effective communication in any language, particularly when speakers are not using their native language. Because of the significant role of English speaking, Boonkit conducted a task-based learning design study in order to promote confidence and speaking skills among Thai English learners. In the study, two interview questions were asked and recordings of the speech of the participants were analyzed. According to the study, promoting self confidence in EFL learners in terms of their speaking ability was recommended to develop their English skills. Boonkit also suggested that English speaking skills should be developed along with listening skills as these integrated skills could help promote and enhance communication achievement with both native English speakers and those who speak English as a second language.

In conclusion, the results from previous studies reveal that English oral communication skills have become increasingly important for success in the contemporary international workplace. In addition, English oral communication skills are vital to the advancement of any business or industry. English has been accepted as the medium for business as well as engineering, tourism, the IT industry, and education. Therefore, business people and learners need to be equipped with an excellent command of English oral communication in order to respond to the impact of globalization and professional demand.

Effective Oral Communication Skills

In the modern business context, oral communication is one of the most common forms of business communication and plays a vital role in the overall function of the organization. Organizations are increasingly interested in hiring people with good or effective speaking skills (Ellen, 2001). Throughout each activity, the employees use words and gestures to convey ideas and impressions to customers, colleagues, and others. Also, effective communication by means of speaking usually creates a number of benefits for both speakers and business organizations. For example, effective speaking skills may lead to opportunities such as formal or public speaking, job training activities, job interviews, and other related activities (Boonkit, 2010).

According to Glenn (1981), basically, communication is a process of conveying or transmitting messages such as ideas, information, or feelings so that the receiver understands it. Communication is a two-way process of exchanging ideas or information between human beings. The essential elements in any form of oral communication involve a speaker or sender, the message or speech, and the listener or receiver. To achieve effective oral communication, the type of language used should be clear, appropriate, and interesting.

Glenn also divides good or effective oral communication into three perspectives. Firstly, effective oral communication needs to be conversational and direct. One needs to develop simple, direct, communicative, and extemporaneous speaking skills that can be used on any occasion. Next, effective oral communication consists of having something to say and the ability to say it well. In order to be an effective communicator, one must have knowledge of the subject as well as presentation skills. Lastly, effective oral communication needs to be useful for both the speaker and receiver. The ultimate effect

of effective oral communication can be measured by the effect it has on both listeners and receivers (Glenn, 1981).

Similarly, communication is considered effective when it achieves the desired reaction or feedback from the recipient. Besides, effective communication is all about conveying messages to other people clearly and unambiguously. It is also about receiving information that others are sending, with as little distortion as possible (Murphy, 2000).

According to Clark, Tinervia, and Zimmer (2000), effective oral communication requires good listening and speaking skills. In effective oral communication, the delivery of the messages of the speaker and their tone of voice is significant. Voice quality is determined by four principal factors: (a) volume, (b) pitch (the degree of highness or lowness of a sound), (c) tone, and (d) tempo (the rate of speed). Moreover, pronunciation (saying words correctly) and enunciation (saying words clearly and distinctly) are also necessary if one needs to communicate at a high level.

In addition, according to Flatley and Lesikar (2005), effective or good oral communication often includes four basic elements. Firstly, good voice quality is the heart of effective oral communication. A message with good voice quality requires pitch, an appropriate delivery speed and volume. The second element is a good speaking style. A speaking style is the blending of pitch, speed, and volume to form a unique speaking personality. A speaker should also have a good idea and sincere attitude towards his or her own speaking style.

A third quality of effective communication is word choice. The larger the vocabulary that a speaker has, the more word choice they have. A good speaker should be able to select the words that are the most familiar to the listener. Also, the selected words should be appropriate and convey the level of courtesy intended by the speaker. The fourth quality is adaptation, which means fitting the message to the listener. It

includes the quality of word selection, voice, and style. These three qualities may vary when the message is delivered to a different listener, such as a member of a different culture, or whether or not it is a social or a work situation. A speaker should develop good voice quality, an effective speaking style, and select words and tailor messages to suit their listener in order to become an effective communicator (Flatley & Lesikar, 2005).

Additionally, according to Marylin (2006), superior English communication skills are a core requisite for obtaining and holding a good job, as well as the potential for promotion. In order to communicate effectively, business people need to use all of the communication tools at their disposal, such as grammar, spelling, pronunciation, and word usage. Additionally, to be considered a good speaker or communicator, an employee needs to have pleasant voice by using proper phonation (voice and tone), clear articulation, and correct pronunciation. To have smooth, fluent, and clear speech and to have a sincere attitude towards a listener are also considered to be a good communicator. Moreover, confidence and a relaxed style are also necessary to impress listeners.

Furthermore, oral English communication skills are viewed as an additional factor in a successful performance at work or a career achievement. In order to communicate effectively, it is important for employees to have knowledge of their job, to speak clearly and correctly and to create coherent messages. The ability to reiterate to show understanding, to listen to answers, and to pay attention to the needs of speakers or customers are also considered essential elements of effective communication (Runnakit, 2007).

According to Lane (2010), oral communication concerns the use of words to create and convey meaning. The words used in oral communication enable the speakers to define, classify, and express beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, and feelings. Effective oral communication also deals with how speakers organize their perceptions and talk about

events in the past, present, and future. Therefore, an understanding of words and vocabulary is essential to effective oral communication and it is crucial to understand both the denotative and the connotative meanings of words in order to communicate successfully.

It can be concluded that effective oral communication skills are vital in any workplace context as they are an integral part of working life. These skills can also enhance work performance and increase the value of an employee to a company. Furthermore, these skills can improve both the rate of productivity and the quality of work. Therefore, the ability to communicate effectively is essential if one wants to build a successful career.

In order to achieve effective oral communication skills, an individual should regularly improve their existing language skills and develop the following abilities:

1. An understanding of the principles of language, knowing how to use grammar correctly, to pronounce correctly, and to use vocabulary appropriately

2. An understanding of the meanings of words and their proper usage (word choice selection)

3. The ability to deliver a message clearly, accurately, and directly

4. Having a pleasant voice or good voice quality, which involves attention to volume, speed, and clarity

5. Having good listening skills, such as listening carefully and paying attention to the needs of the speaker

6. Having confidence, a relaxed style, and the ability to adapt the message to fit the needs of the listener

Problems in English Oral Communication of Non-Native English Speakers

In today's competitive business world, English is the language of the international workplace. In the multilingual workplace, almost all communication is conducted in English, and resources such as standard operating procedures, manuals, and even announcements are all prepared in English (Ali & Kassim, 2010). However, effective communication in the workplace has increasingly been recognized as a major problem for employees. A lack of accuracy in the target language is not the only problem faced by employees; they also experienced difficulty with mastering specific terms and using language appropriately (Runnakit, 2007). In addition, not all foreign business people or non-native English speakers are adequately prepared to handle communication problems, especially when non-native English speakers have either insufficient English knowledge, limited experience with or exposure to English interaction, or lack communicative competence. Hence, speaking English or English oral communication is considered to be difficult for non-native English speakers as English is not their mother tongue (Khamkhien, 2010; Myers, Penrase, & Rasberry, 2000).

A number of studies focusing on the issue of English communication problems have been carried out. For example, Bloch and Starks (1999) conducted a study of the various types of English that are spoken throughout the world. From this study, it was found that the main four problems of non-native English speakers in English communication were (a) a total lack of understanding between speaker and listener (b) poor or insufficient vocabulary and use of idiom, (c) distortion or misunderstanding of the message, and (d) inappropriate formulation of the message. Bloch and Starks also suggested that in order to overcome these problems, business people needed to have sufficient and practical English knowledge and communication skills, as well as a greater awareness of what conversation entails.

Moreover, Forey and Lockwood (2007) conducted a study to analyze the call texts of customer services representatives in the Philippines. The findings revealed that the main problems for the non-native English employees were grammatical knowledge or English pronunciation. The problems were also related to an inability to understand a complex text, non-fluency in the interaction, and a lack of awareness of the country and the culture of their customers.

In Thailand, several studies have confirmed that speaking or oral communication in English is the most desirable skill for Thai speakers or employees, especially those who interact with foreign speakers or customers. Most Thai students have studied English for approximately 8-10 years before reaching university level; however, their level of confidence and English speaking competence remain low (Boonkit, 2010). Also, Thai speakers seem to encounter various difficulties or problems with oral English communication, as mentioned in several studies. For instance, Meemak (2002) analyzed the English needs and problems experienced by Thai Tourist Police. The results indicated that the officers had limited vocabulary and could not express their own ideas coherently or correctly. As a result, English training courses that focus on listening and speaking skills as well as vocabulary acquisition, should be offered to improve the English language skills of Thai Tourist Police officers.

Additionally, Jaisutthi (2006) conducted a study to investigate the English listening and speaking skills of hotel front office staff as observed by non-Asian guests. The study showed that the greatest barriers to oral communication of the hotel front office staff were word choice and a lack of vocabulary. They were unable to use words properly or to fluently express their ideas. In addition, the findings also indicated problems with the incorrect use of grammar and mispronunciation.

Aungcharoen (2006) conducted a study to investigate the English word stress perception and production skills of Thai 12th grade students. The study revealed that Thai speakers of English had difficulties with oral communication. One of the most common problems was word stress misplacement. It was also revealed that students with high levels of English proficiency had better word stress perception and production skills than students with lower levels of English proficiency.

Vasavakul (2006) conducted a study of business oral English communication for customer-services staff at the international banks. The results revealed that speaking and listening were considered the most necessary skills for the staff. It was also reported that speaking and listening skills were rated as difficult to very difficult skills compared to reading and writing. In addition, the findings showed that most of the targeted staff still did not have a satisfactory level of English proficiency to handle their jobs. The problems in oral communication of the target staff found from the study were (a) the lack of understanding of the questions asked, which needed a lot of repetition from the interviewer, (b) long pauses during conversations, (c) low fluency, and (d) low confidence and nervousness when speaking due to the lack of opportunity to practice English.

Tipmontree (2007) conducted a study to assess English language use and the associated problems in English communication among Thai tourist police officers. The participants in this research were 40 Thai Tourist Police officers working at the radio call center and at the Patrol and Bangkok Airport Service. The study clearly revealed that Thai tourist police had problems communicating in English with foreign tourists. The most common problems were English grammar and understanding the foreign accents of the tourists. The feeling of embarrassment that Thai Tourist Police officers felt when they could not understand or reply was also identified as another problem in the study. It

was suggested that the Thai Tourist Police officers, especially those who dealt with foreign tourists, clearly needed to improve their speaking and overall English skills.

Khamkaew (2009) conducted a study to investigate the needs and problems in English listening and speaking skills of Thai Metropolitan Police officers. From the study, it was found that listening skill was regarded as a major problem encountered by the participants. These listening problems included a failure to understand the various accents of tourists of different nationalities and a failure to catch the words of the foreign tourists who spoke quickly. In addition, in terms of speaking skills, the problems found were being unable to say basic expressions, being unable to speak in complete sentences, and difficulties in pronouncing English vowel sounds. It was also found that the majority of the participants needed to improve their listening and speaking skills in English in order to carry on conversation with foreign tourists more effectively.

Despite the fact that most Thai students have studied English for almost ten years before entering university, many of them lack confidence and find communicating with foreigners to be a major problem (Boonkit, 2010). From Boonkit's study of the development and enhancement of speaking skills for non-native English speakers, the findings revealed that the main problems among Thais with speaking English were pronunciation and grammatical errors. This study also identified errors involving words and the final sounds of some English. Pronunciation, especially word stress and final sounds such as /z/ and /s/, was a common weakness found among the participants. Another weakness in terms of grammatical errors was the use of incorrect tenses and the use of wrong grammatical structure in every sentence.

It can be concluded that English language competence and oral communications skills are the most necessary skills for business people who work in international companies and government officers who deal with foreigners. Besides English linguistic

knowledge, communicative competence seems to play an important role in business English interaction. Most countries have realized the importance of English language training, as English has become the international language and the accepted international language for business (Khamkhien, 2010).

However, many non-native English people including Thais seem to have difficulties or problems with English oral communication. Difficulties with communication or communication breakdowns in English interactions may not be related to just discrete grammatical features or the accent of the speakers. The problem seems to be more about communicative competence and confidence in speaking than any other factor. Based on the aforementioned studies related to problems with English oral communication, the main problems can be classified as (a) pronunciation, (b) grammar, (c) vocabulary, (d) listening comprehension, (e) English accents, (f) fluency, (g) cultural awareness, (h) and self-confidence.

Oral Communication Strategies

The main purpose of oral communication is to successfully transmit an intended message. However, in a situation where the message sender and the message receiver have different native languages, it is difficult for communicators to achieve their communicative goals (Somsai & Intaraprasert, 2011). As a result, communication strategies are often used to deal with these problems, especially when speaking. This is due to the limited knowledge of the communicators or restrictions in their use of language knowledge in a particular setting (Savignon, 1983). Besides, communication strategies are often used to enhance the effectiveness of communication, even if there are no difficulties with oral communication (Bygate, 2002).

According to Savignon (1983), communication strategies are techniques used to sustain communication. These strategies include paraphrasing, circumlocution (a

roundabout expression or indirect way of speaking), asking for repetition or emphasis, seeking clarification, and avoidance of words, structures, or topics. These strategies are used to meet the demands of ongoing communication. Thus, the effective use of coping strategies is important for communicators in all contexts, and also distinguishes highly competent communicators from the less competent.

In addition, according to Kirkpatrick (2007), communication strategies are used to ensure collaborative communication among those who have learned English as a second language and consider themselves multilinguals. Additionally, these strategies are aimed to ensure communication among participants as well as serving to save face. The adoption of communicative strategies is also to ensure smooth communication between the speaker and the listener. Kirkpatrick has listed several effective strategies for oral communication. For example, 'a request for repetition and clarification' is used when a communicator does not understand the message. Next, 'the strategy of spelling out the words' is used to clarify unfamiliar or unclear words. Also, to ensure the message is clearly understood, the speaker can adopt 'the strategy of making explicit by paraphrasing.' The speaker can also employ 'let it pass' strategies or avoidance strategies in order to continue the conversation when it seems that the message is not clearly understood yet, but will become clear later.

In a study on the oral English communication strategies employed by first-year medical students conducted by Chanawong (2007), eight types of communication strategies were found. These strategies, ranked from the most to the least used, were (a) literal translation, (b) code switching, (c) self-repair, (d) circumlocution, (e) appeal for assistance, (f) generalization or use of an all-purpose word, (g) topic avoidance, and (h) word coinage. It was also found that the communication strategy that the participants

found the most effective was 'circumlocution,' an indirect way of speaking or using many words to describe something simple.

In the study of adjusting communication strategies to language proficiency, Ting and Phan (2008) analyzed the typology of communication using an integrated framework comprising psycholinguistic (Faerch & Kasper, 1984), interactional (Tarone, 1980), and discourse (Clennell, 1995) perspectives. Ting and Phan have outlined the typology of communication strategies that second language (L2) users may use to deal with communication breakdowns to several strategies. The first is the abandon message strategy, when a speaker begins to talk about a concept, but is unable to continue due to a lack of meaning structure, stops mid-utterances and moves on to another idea. The second strategy is topic avoidance, when a speaker does not talk about a concept because he or she does not have the target language item or structure for it. The third strategy, literal translation, refers to when a speaker translates word for word from another language.

The fourth is the language switch strategy, when a speaker uses a term from another language without bothering to translate. The fifth strategy, circumlocution, is when a speaker describes the characteristics or elements of an object or action instead of using the appropriate target language structure. The sixth strategy is word coinage, when a speaker makes up new words in order to communicate a desired concept.

The seventh strategy is approximation, involves the speaker using a single target language vocabulary item that he or she knows is not correct, but shares enough semantic features in common with the desired item to satisfy the speaker. The appeal for assistance strategy involves a speaker asking for the correct item or structure. The last strategy is lexical repetition, when a speaker repeats words or phrases with a system of tones (e.g.

rise, fall, rise-fall) for discourse and topic maintenance, appeal for assistance, request for clarification and to indicate comprehension (Ting & Phan, 2008).

Furthermore, in the study of exploring factors affecting the use of oral communication strategies, Huang (2010) concluded that communication strategies can be classified into two types. The first was the avoidance or reduction strategy, which included, for example, topic avoidance, message abandonment, or meaning replacement. The communicator used these strategies to avoid unfamiliar topics, to avoid solving communication problems, and to reduce or abandon unsuccessful messages. The second type was the achievement or compensatory strategy, which include an appeal for help, code switching, literal translation, first language substitution, generalization, and word coinage. These strategies were used to reach the original goal of communication.

Similarly, in the study of strategies for coping with face-to-face oral communication problems employed by Thai university students majoring in English, conducted by Somsai and Intaraprasert (2011), it was found that communication strategies could be classified into two types, which were achievement and avoidance strategies. Achievement strategies were employed to deal with communication problems directly by using alternative choices in order to get the message across. Achievement strategies included word coinage, language switching, paraphrasing, or an appeal for help. The second strategy was avoidance strategies, such as topic avoidance or message abandonment. These strategies were employed to change, replace, or reduce the content of the intended message so that the communicators kept the message within their communicative resources.

To conclude, communication strategies are useful techniques for coping with difficulties in oral communication, especially for those whose English is as a second or a foreign language. Additionally, communication strategies refer to the devices or

techniques employed by communicators either to solve communication problems or to

enhance communicative effectiveness. The adoption of such communication strategies is

to ensure smooth communication between the speaker and the listener. This is because

smooth and collaborative communication is another major communicative goal

(Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Communication strategies are classified differently by a number of researchers

according to the way one views them. However, most literature on communication

strategies embodies similar and overlapping taxonomies. Hence, based on the

aforementioned studies, communication strategies can be listed below:

1. Avoidance or reduction strategies, which include avoidance of words, topics or

   message abandonment.

2. Achievement or compensatory strategies, which include:

   (a) Making messages explicit by paraphrasing

   (b) Approximation / using a word that means approximately the same

   (d) Word coinage / making up a word to substitute for the unknown word

   (e) Circumlocution / talking in an indirect way of speaking

   (f) Generalization or use of all purpose words

   (g) Language or Code switching / using a term from another language without

       bothering to translate

   (h) Literal translation / translating word for word from another language

   (i) Asking for repetition, seeking for clarification or emphasis to confirm

       understanding

   (j) Asking to spelling out the word

   (k) Appeal for assistance / asking for the correct item, meaning, or structure.

Summary

English is considered the international language and English oral communication skills are a requirement for success and advancement in the contemporary international workplace. Effective oral communication skills can enhance work performance and increase the value of an employee to a company. The ability to communicate effectively is essential for career advancement and business people and learners need to have an excellent command of English oral communication in order to respond to the impact of globalization and professional demand.

Several studies were conducted to investigate the English oral communication problems and the communication strategies used by non-native English speakers in both a business and an academic setting. It was found that non-native English speakers, including Thais, encountered a variety of problems with English oral communication. As a result, communication strategies were often used to deal with oral communication problems; especially for non-native English speakers. It is worth noting that communication strategies are not only useful techniques for coping with difficulties in oral communication, but they can also enhance communicative effectiveness, and ensure smooth communication.

Although there have been many research studies on English communication, there is no known study investigating the problems encountered by Thai customer-service employees in an international petroleum company. Therefore, this study was designed to focus on the English oral communication problems and strategies used by Thai customer-service employees in an international petroleum company based in Bangkok, Thailand. Consequently, the results of this study have implications for speakers or learners who need to improve their English proficiency and for an organization to design an effective English training course for their employees.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Selection of the company.

There are four major reasons why the targeted company was selected. Firstly, the targeted company is the world's largest multinational oil and gas corporation, and its parent company is located in the United States. The company also has branches around the world, in the United States as well as Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Asia Pacific region, which is appropriate for this study as it is an international workplace. Secondly, the company set up the Bangkok Business Support center in Thailand in 2003. The Bangkok Business Support center currently provides support to customers from both native English speaking countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, and those from non-native English speaking countries, such as Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan. Next, as an international company, the standard language is English, while the majority of customer service employees in Bangkok are Thais who do not speak English as their first language. Finally, the researcher had been working with this company for over six years; therefore, it was convenient to collect data and worthwhile to study the problems of English oral communication in an international setting at this company.

Selection of the participants.

The participants in this study were Thai employees working in the Fuels Marketing Customer Service department, who were at intermediate level of English proficiency with the minimum requirement of the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) score at 600, and/or had fluency in the required third language for some

specific countries. The participants who were willing to participate in this study were 194

Thai employees responsible for customers from both native English speaking countries

and non-native English speaking countries. The participants were categorized into two

groups. The first group consisted of the employees who were responsible for

communicating with native English speaking customers, while the second group was

responsible for communicating with non-native English speaking customers. The native

English speaking customers were from native English speaking countries, including the

United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. The non-native English

speaking customers were from non-native English speaking countries, including Thailand,

Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan. In this study, all 220 customer-service

employees were asked to participate. There are 194 customer-service employees who

were willing to participate in the study and complete the questionnaire. The customer-

service employees were from the following sub-functions, whose main tasks were dealing

with foreign customers over the phone, answering customer queries, and providing other

services to their customers:

1.   Customer Support Team

2.   Order and Delivery Team

3.   Control and Operations Support Team

4.   Customer Relations Team

5.   Aviation and Marine Support Team

Instrumentation

The key instrument in this research study was a survey questionnaire developed by

the researcher. It included both close-ended and open-ended questions, which were self-

administered by the participants. The participants were asked about their problems with

English use in terms of oral communication and the strategies they used when they

encountered problems during conversations or did not understand conversations with foreign customers.

The questionnaire was revised according to expert advice to ensure the validity and appropriateness of the content, based on the suggestions of the thesis advisor and co-advisor in English department at Srinakharinwirot University, suggestions from English native speakers teaching English at Srinakharinwirot University, and suggestions from English native speakers working in the customer service department at the selected company. The comments and suggestions from the experts and the implications of the pilot study contributed to the development of the final draft of the questionnaire for the actual study. Therefore, it could be considered that the questionnaire of the study was valid and appropriate. In addition, to check the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha, the most common measure of internal consistency of multiple Likert questions in a survey/questionnaire, was also used to determine if the scale of the questionnaire is reliable prior to the actual study (Wikipedia, 2012).

The close-ended questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part I aimed to gather background information on the participants such as the participants' gender, length of working experience, supported function, and responsible countries. Part II was concerned with their English ability while communicating with their foreign customers. Part III asked about the strategies they used to overcome the problems they experienced during conversations with foreign customers. The participants were asked to rate their problems and the strategies they used to overcome these problems by choosing one of five items on a Likert scale – strongly agree, agree, moderately agree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

An open-ended questionnaire was added to Part II and III to gather more in-depth information on English oral communication problems encountered by employees and the strategies they used during communication with foreign customers. In this part, the

participants had the opportunity to provide more ideas and opinions that were not mentioned in the closed-ended questions. However, none of the participants provide any additional answers to all open-ended parts. Hence, there were no results discussed for the open-ended parts.

Reliability analysis of the questionnaire.

The purpose of this analysis was to check the reliability of the questionnaire developed by the researcher. The thesis advisor, hence, was asked to examine the content of the questionnaire and agreed that it was valid and appropriate to use in this study. In addition, the questionnaire was pilot tested with three different departments, the Retail Support Department, the Chemical Customer Service Department, and the Human Resources Department, in January 2012. The purpose of the pilot test was to check for clarity of the language and content, to establish an appropriate completion time, and to see if revision of the whole questionnaire would be needed for the actual test (Mc Millan & Schumacher, 2009). As a result, Cronbach's alpha (α), the most common measure of internal consistency of multiple Likert questions in a survey/questionnaire, was used to determine if the scale of the questionnaire was reliable prior to the actual study. A commonly accepted rule to describe the internal consistency score using Cronbach's alpha is as follows (Wikipedia, 2012):

Cronbach's alpha	Internal Consistency
$\alpha \geq .90$	Excellent
$.90 > \alpha \geq .80$	Good
$.80 > \alpha \geq .70$	Acceptable
$.70 > \alpha \geq .60$	Questionable
$.60 > \alpha \geq .50$	Poor
$.50 > \alpha$	Unacceptable

Table 1 shows the results of the reliability analysis of the questionnaire used during the pilot study. In the pilot study, the participants were 22 Thai employees from different departments working in the international company. All of them used English to communicate with foreign customers and had similar characteristics with those of customer service employees in the actual study, for instances, they communicated with foreign customers from different countries. The questionnaire used in the pilot stage contained 64 questions. The Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient for the specific sample of the pilot study was 0.64, which indicated quite low internal consistency.

In order to increase the internal consistency alpha (α) score, the questionnaire was modified based on information gathered from both participants in the pilot study and the researcher's thesis advisor and co-advisor. Some irrelevant parts and repeated questions were removed from the questionnaire. Also, the number of questions with low alpha scores was reduced to a more appropriate length. After review and revision by the thesis advisor and co-advisor, the questionnaire was employed in the actual study.

In Table 2, the results of the reliability analysis of the actual survey are presented. In the actual study, the participants consisted of 194 Thai customer-service employees. The questionnaire used in this study consisted of 47 questions. The alpha (α) coefficient for the revised questionnaire was 0.90, which indicated a high level of internal consistency. The questionnaire had a high reliability coefficient, as higher than 0.70 indicates good internal consistency of the items in the scale, and was therefore considered acceptable and appropriate for this research study.

Table 1

Reliability Analysis of the Pilot Study Questionnaire (N = 22)

		N	%	Reliability Statistics	
Cases	Valid	22	100.0	Cronbach's	N of Items
	Excluded[a]	0	.0	Alpha (α)	
	Total	22	100.0	.64	64

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Table 2

Reliability Analysis of the Actual Study Questionnaire (N = 194)

		N	%	Reliability Statistics	
Cases	Valid	194	100.0	Cronbach's	N of Items
	Excluded[a]	0	.0	Alpha (α)	
	Total	194	100.0	.90	47

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Data Collection Procedures

The data for this study was obtained from the close-ended and open-ended questionnaire. The researcher asked for permission from the customer service department's manager and was allowed to conduct this research study. The questionnaire was given to all 220 participants in February 2012. All participants were given two weeks to complete the questionnaire. Internal mail routing was used as the main channel in distributing and collecting the questionnaires because it was reliable, convenient, and cost-saving. A cover letter providing information about the study, confirmation of participation willingness, and the researcher's contact information was sent to participants together with the questionnaires.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the data obtained from the questionnaire to answer the five research questions. The results of the questionnaire were interpreted, categorized, and tabulated on computer sheets. The results were also calculated into statistical values as follows:

1. The data concerning the general background was presented as a percentage.

2. A five-point Likert scale was used to score the participant's level of agreement in terms of their English oral communication problems and strategies used to communicate with foreign customers. It is a scale used in questionnaires to specify the level of agreement or disagreement based on the criteria of Rensis Likert (1932) as follows:

Scale	Level of Agreement	Mean Range
5	Strongly Agree	4.21 – 5.00
4	Agree	3.41 – 4.20
3	Moderately Agree	2.61 – 3.40
2	Disagree	1.81 – 2.60
1	Strongly Disagree	1.00 – 1.80

    The mean range was calculated by subtracting the lowest scale (minimum scale = 1) from the greatest (maximum scale = 5) and divided by the interval range (4). Therefore, the class interval of the mean range in this study was at 0.79.

3. Cronbach's alpha (α), the most common measure of internal consistency of multiple Likert questions in a survey/questionnaire, was used to determine if the scale of the questionnaire was reliable prior to the actual study.

4. The mean Score (M) was used to interpret the average level of the participant's problems with and the strategies used during oral English communication. The items

with mean scores from 2.61 to 5.00 indicated a high level of problems with English

oral communication in the international work place and an increased use of strategies

to overcome them. On the other hand, a lower mean score indicated fewer problems

with oral communication and fewer strategies used to overcome them.

5.   The *t*-test was used to investigate if there was a significant difference between the

strategies used by both group of Thai employees.

The results were presented in tables and figures together with full explanations of

descriptive analysis. The open-ended questions were not discussed as none of the

participants provide any additional answers to all open-ended parts.

Summary

This chapter described the research methodology of the present study. The

participants in this study were 194 Thai customer-service employees working in an

international petroleum company based in Bangkok, Thailand.

The instrument in this study was a survey questionnaire which was developed by the

researcher and was then validated by three experts. The questionnaire was also pilot

tested with a different group of employees. The questionnaire was adjusted in response to

comments made by the experts and feedback from the participants in the pilot study.

The questionnaire was comprised of three parts and contained both close-ended and

open-ended questions regarding demographical data, English oral communication

problems, and oral communication strategies used by Thai employees when speaking

English. The results of the questionnaire were analyzed to answer five research questions.

The results were interpreted, categorized, and tabulated on computer sheets. The results

were also calculated into statistical values. A descriptive analysis was also used to

analyze data regarding the problems experienced and strategies used by Thai employees

during English oral communication.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Demographic Data of the Participants

This part reported the descriptive analysis concerning the demographic data of Thai

customer-service employees in an international petroleum company. The results were

presented in Table 3.

As illustrated in Table 3, 194 employees participated in this study. The majority of

the sampled employees in the Customer Service department of this international company

were female (75.30%). Only 24.70% of the employees were male. In terms of years of

working experience in the Customer Service department of this company, most of the

employees had over six years of experience (39.70%), followed by two to three years

(24.70%), four to five years (23.70%), and less than one year (11.90%).

Furthermore, in terms of their current function, the results showed that most of the

employees were from the Customer Support team (34%), followed by the Order and

Delivery team (25.80%), the Customer Relations team (18%), the Marine and Aviation

team (10.30%), and the Control and Operation Support team (7.70%). All the previously

mentioned teams had higher levels of exposure to English oral communication with

external foreign customers in the course of their daily work. In addition, employees

whose main task was to provide support and handle the functional management of both

Thai and foreign internal customers and employees with other functions, such as the

Project Support team, the Knowledge Management team and secretarial staff, were

limited to only 4.20%.

In conclusion, the findings indicated that the major function of customer service

employees was oral communication with foreign customers over the phone. Some of

their other main tasks included approaching external customers, answering customer queries and providing other services, rather than supervising, recruiting, or coaching new employees.

In terms of the countries that the customer-service employees were responsible for, approximately two-thirds (68.60%) of these employees handled customers from non-native English speaking countries, whereas one-third (31.40%) handled customers from native English speaking countries. The non-native English speaking countries relevant to this study included Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and Thailand. The native English speaking countries included in this study were Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom.
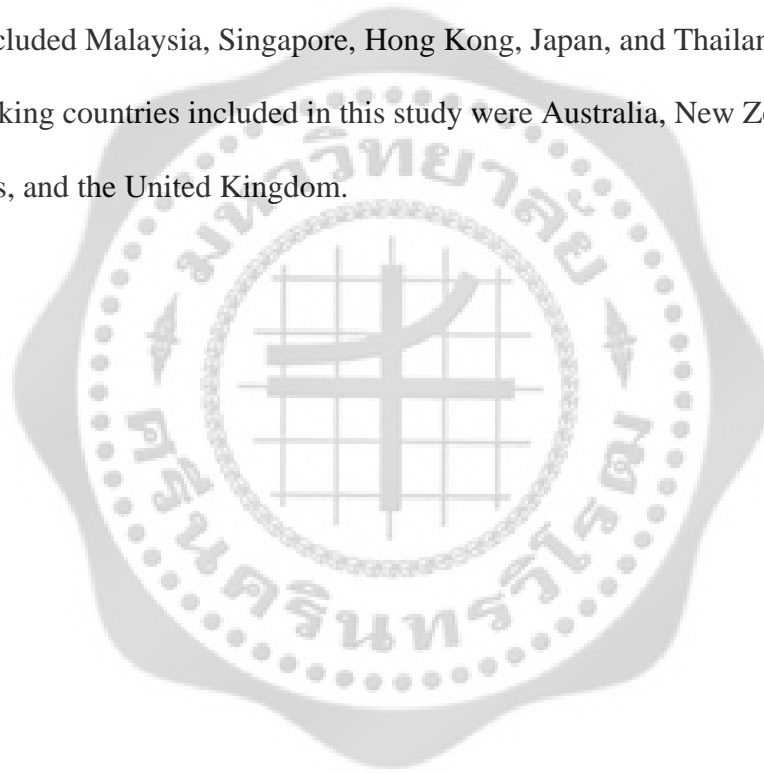
Table 3

Demographic Data of the Participants (N = 194)

Items	Number *(n)*	Percentage (%)
Gender:		
Female	146	75.30
Male	48	24.70
Years of Working Experience in the Customer Service Department:		
Less than 1 year	23	11.90
2 – 3 years	48	24.70
4 – 5 years	46	23.70
More than 6 years	77	39.70
Current Function in Customer Service Department:		
Customer Support	66	34.00
Order & Delivery	50	25.80
Customer Relations	35	18.00
Marine & Aviation	20	10.30
Control & Operation Support	15	7.70
Others	8	4.20
Countries that the Customer Service Department are responsible for:		
Employees responsible for Non-Native English Speaking Countries	133	68.60
Employees responsible for Native English Speaking Countries	61	31.40

Results of the Five Research Questions

This part includes a descriptive analysis of the research findings in accordance with the five research questions. The data were analyzed and calculated using Mean score (*M*), Standard Deviation (*SD*), and *t*-Test analysis.

The results of the analysis of both groups of employees were presented in parallel and in accordance with each research question. Group 1 consisted of 61 employees who communicated with native English speaking customers and Group 2 consisted of 133 employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers.

Research Questions 1 and 2.

1. What were the English oral communication problems encountered by Thai employees who communicated with native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

2. What were the English oral communication problems encountered by Thai employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

Results.

As indicated in Table 4, the results revealed that Thai employees communicating with native English speaking customers (Group 1) moderately agreed that they encountered only three critical problems out of the 21 problems (15%) listed in the questionnaire. The problems encountered by this group at moderate level of agreement included (a) having trouble with listening comprehension when foreign customers spoke too fast (*M* = 2.85), (b) producing grammatical errors when speaking (*M* = 2.85), and (c) trouble during telephone calls (*M* = 2.64). However, the all participants communicated with native English speaking customers disagreed with most of the items (*M* = 2.27).

This disagreement with the majority of the items indicated that they did not have critical or serious problems with the rest of the items.

On the contrary, the Thai employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers (Group 2) agreed that they encountered a wider variety of problems than the first group ($M = 2.60$). This group agreed that they encountered 14 critical problems out of 21 problems (60%). The most critical problem for this group was listening comprehension. They were unable to understand foreign customers who spoke English too fast ($M = 3.14$), especially during telephone calls. Moreover, they also reported problems with grammar usage in the questionnaire. These problems included producing grammatical errors when speaking ($M = 2.95$), and an inability to use the plural forms of nouns and verb tenses correctly.

Furthermore, the results also revealed that the employees in Group 2 moderately agreed that they encountered other problems when communicating with non-native English speaking customers. These problems included difficulty understanding foreign accents ($M = 2.90$), producing word stress misplacement ($M = 2.73$), lacking or having insufficient knowledge of the cultural background of their customers ($M = 2.62$), low fluency ($M = 2.62$), and trouble regulating the volume of their voice ($M = 2.61$).

Table 4

The English Oral Communication Problems Encountered by Thai Employees

Communicating with Native English Speaking Customers (Group 1, n = 61) and Non-

Native English Speaking Customers (Group 2, n = 133) (N = 194)

Functions	Problems	Group 1		Group 2	
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Listening Comprehension	1. Difficulties understanding speech during telephone calls	2.64	9.67	2.71	.90
	2. Inability to understand sentences when foreign customers speak English too quickly	2.85	1.01	3.14	.92
	3. Difficulties when to pay close attention during telephone calls	2.05	.74	2.29	.89
	4. Difficulties with accuracy during telephone calls	2.33	.87	2.69	.87
Fluency	5. Low fluency in spoken English	2.28	.93	2.62	.89
	6. Long pauses in spoken English	1.97	.75	2.24	.83
	7. Inability to respond spontaneously	1.82	.85	2.37	.95
Grammar	8. Producing grammatical errors when speaking	2.85	1.09	2.95	.85
	9. Inability to use the plural form of nouns correctly	2.34	.93	2.78	.92
	10. Inability to use the forms of verb tenses correctly	2.46	.10	2.75	.93

(continued)

Table 4 (continued)

The English Oral Communication Problems Encountered by Thai Employees

Communicating with Native English Speaking Customers (Group 1, n=61) and Non-

Native English Speaking Customers (Group 2, n=133) (N = 194)

Functions	Problems	Group 1		Group 2	
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Vocabulary	11. Inability to respond with inappropriate words	2.13	.79	2.49	.98
	12. Poor or insufficient vocabulary	2.21	.82	2.57	1.00
Cultural Awareness	13. Insufficient knowledge of the customers cultural background	2.15	.81	2.62	.97
Self-confidence	14. Low confidence and anxiety when speaking English	2.08	.88	2.56	.10
Accents	15. Difficulties understanding foreign accents	2.49	.89	2.90	.87
Pronunciation	16. Producing word stress misplacements	2.49	.99	2.73	.87
	17. Poor English pronunciation	2.08	.78	2.55	.95
Voice Quality	18. Difficulty regulating the volume of their voice	2.33	.83	2.61	.87
	19. Problems with speaking too fast	2.08	.78	2.32	.77
	20. Problems with speaking too slow	2.02	.74	2.27	.78
	21. Inability to enunciate each consonant	2.08	.69	2.37	.76
	TOTAL	2.27	.53	2.60	.63

Research Questions 3 and 4.

3. What were the strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

4. What were the strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with non-native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

Results.

The results in Table 5 revealed that Thai employees who communicated with native English speaking customers (Group 1) employed both achievement strategies ($M = 3.02$) and avoidance strategies ($M = 2.65$). In terms of achievement strategies, the top four strategies with highest mean score at agreed level rated by Thai employees who communicated with native English speaking customers included directly asking their customers about what they did not get ($M = 3.95$), seeking a request for clarification ($M = 3.92$), making something explicit through paraphrasing ($M = 3.74$), and generalization or the use of all-purpose words ($M = 3.69$).

The employees indicated a moderate level of agreement regarding the use of other strategies, which included asking customers to speak more slowly ($M = 3.39$), using a dictionary ($M = 3.36$), using repetition with a system of tones ($M = 3.34$), asking customers to spell out a word ($M = 3.23$), asking customers to repeat themselves in a louder voice ($M = 3.21$), approximation by using other words that have approximately the same meaning ($M = 2.97$), and circumlocution or employing an indirect way of speaking ($M = 2.90$). The rest of the strategies, for example, literal translation, word coinage, an appeal for help from colleagues, and asking customers to use easy words, were rated at disagreed level by employees who communicated with native English speaking customers.

In terms of avoidance strategies, there were two strategies rated at an agreed level by this group, which included focusing on key words only ($M = 3.10$), and changing the topic ($M = 3.00$). The other strategies, paying attention to what they understood and pretending to understand, were rated at disagreed level.

Similar to the Group 1, the results from Table 5 revealed that Thai employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers (Group 2) also used both types of strategies. Achievement strategies were rated at the highest total mean score of 3.18; whereas avoidance strategies were rated with the total mean score of 2.77.

In terms of achievement strategies, the top four strategies used by Thai employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers were generalization or using general words or terms ($M = 3.75$), followed by making a request for clarification request ($M = 3.74$), directly asking customers for what they did not get ($M = 3.75$), and paraphrasing ($M = 3.64$). Moreover, when this group experienced difficulty during communication with non-native English speaking customers, they also used other strategies at moderate level. These strategies included asking customers for repetition in either a louder voice or at a slower pace ($M = 3.45$), repeating words or phrases with a system of tones (rise and fall) ($M = 3.35$), using a dictionary ($M = 3.35$), asking customers to spell out words ($M = 3.26$), approximation, or using another word that means approximately the same thing ($M = 3.22$), circumlocution, or using an indirect way of speaking ($M = 3.14$), asking customers to use easy words ($M = 2.72$), and appealing for help from colleagues ($M = 2.61$). It was also found that there were only two strategies rated at disagreed level by these employees, word coinage and language or code switching.

In terms of avoidance strategies, the three strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with non-native English speaking customers included focusing on key

words only ($M = 3.34$), paying attention to what they understood ($M = 2.80$), and

changing the topic ($M = 2.57$). However, there is one strategy, pretending to understand

the conversation, which the participants rated as disagreed level.

Table 5

The Strategies Used by Thai Employees to Communicate with Native English Speaking

Customers (Group 1, n = 61) and Non-Native English Speaking Customers (Group 2, n =

133) (N = 194)

Strategies	Group 1		Group 2	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Achievement or Compensatory Strategies:				
- Asking customers to spell out words	3.23	1.28	3.26	1.32
- Asking customers to use easy words	2.30	.94	2.72	1.05
- Asking customers for repetition in a louder voice	3.21	1.05	3.35	.98
- Asking customers to speak more slowly	3.39	1.14	3.45	.93
- Repeating words or phrases with a system of tones	3.34	1.05	3.35	.93
- Making a request for clarification	3.92	.94	3.74	.79
- Directly asking customers about their problems	3.95	.85	3.74	.80
- Literal translation into first language	2.11	1.05	2.71	1.97
- Asking for help with translation	2.23	1.10	2.61	.96
- Using a dictionary to translate unfamiliar words	3.36	2.74	3.35	1.05
- Circumlocution (using indirect words or roundabout expressions)	2.90	1.06	3.14	.96
- Using another language	1.72	1.04	2.45	1.16
- Word coinage (making up own new words)	2.21	1.25	2.48	1.10
- Using general words or terms	3.69	.96	3.75	.85
- Paraphrasing	3.74	.10	3.64	.81
- Approximation	2.97	1.03	3.22	.94
TOTAL	3.02	.58	3.18	.51

Table 5 (continued)

The Strategies Used by Thai Employees to Communicate with Native English Speaking

Customers (Group 1, n = 61) and Non-Native English Speaking Customers (Group 2, n =

133) (N = 194)

Strategies	Group 1		Group 2	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Avoidance or Reduction Strategies				
- Changing the topic when they feel they lack the knowledge to understand customers	3.00	5.55	2.57	.93
- Focusing on key words to get the overall message	3.10	1.04	3.34	.98
- Only paying attention to what they have understood	2.49	1.00	2.80	.10
- Pretending to understand the conversation	2.00	1.00	2.35	.91
TOTAL	2.65	1.62	2.77	.70

Research Question 5.

5. Was there a significant difference between the strategies used by Thai

employees to communicate with native English speaking customers and non-

native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in

Bangkok?

Results.

An independent-sample *t*-test was conducted to compare the uses of oral

communication strategies by both groups of Thai employees. As indicated in Table 6 and

Table 7, it was found that there was no significant difference between the strategies used

by Thai employees to communicate with native English speaking customers (*M* = 2.94,

SD = .61) and those used to communicate with non-native English speaking customers

(*M* = 3.10, SD = .48); (*t* = 1.95, *p* = .05). In other words, employees communicating with

non-native English speaking customers had a higher mean score in terms of the use of oral communication strategies than employees communicating with native English speaking customers.

These results suggested that both groups of employees used almost exactly the same oral communication strategies when communicating with foreign customers or when facing oral communication problems with their customers. However, the mean score indicated that employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers rated the use of oral communication strategies at a higher level and also put more effort into overcoming communication problems by a variety use of oral communication strategies.

Table 6

The t-Test Analysis: Comparison of the Strategies Used by Both Groups of Employees
(N = 194)

Group of Employees	n	M	SD	SEM
- Employees communicating with native English speaking customers	61	2.94	.61	.08
- Employees communicating with non native English speaking customers	133	3.10	.48	.04

Table 7

The t-Test Analysis: The Strategies Used by Both Groups of Employees to Communicate

with Native and Non-Native English Speaking Customers (N = 194)

| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | MD | SED | 95% CI | |
									LL	UL
Strategies Score	Equal variances assumed	.38	.54	1.95*	192	.05	.16	.08	-.00	.32
	Equal variances not assumed			1.78	95.62	.08	.16	.09	-.02	.33

* p < .05

Summary

This chapter presented the results from the data collection procedures in response to the five research questions. The information from the data analysis via the use of questionnaire has been reported. The research results showed that both groups of Thai employees had problems in English oral communication at different levels of agreement. However, the group of employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers had rated the communication problems with higher mean scores than the group who communicated with native English speaking customers did. The most common problems found in both groups were listening comprehension and grammar usage. Moreover, the employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers also moderately agreed that they had problems understanding foreign accents, low fluency in spoken English, insufficient knowledge of the cultural background of their customers, trouble regulating the volume of their voice, insufficient vocabulary, low confidence, and poor English pronunciation.

In terms of the use of oral communication strategies, both groups of Thai employees used both achievement or compensatory strategies and avoidance or reduction strategies. The most commonly used achievement strategies employed by both groups were (a) directly asking their customers what they did not understand (b) seeking a clarification request, (c) making something explicit through paraphrasing, (d) making generalizations by using general words or terms.

In addition, it was found that there was no significant difference between the strategies used by both group of employees. However, based on the mean score, it was clear that employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers agreed that they used more variety of oral communication strategies and put more effort into overcoming their communication problems.
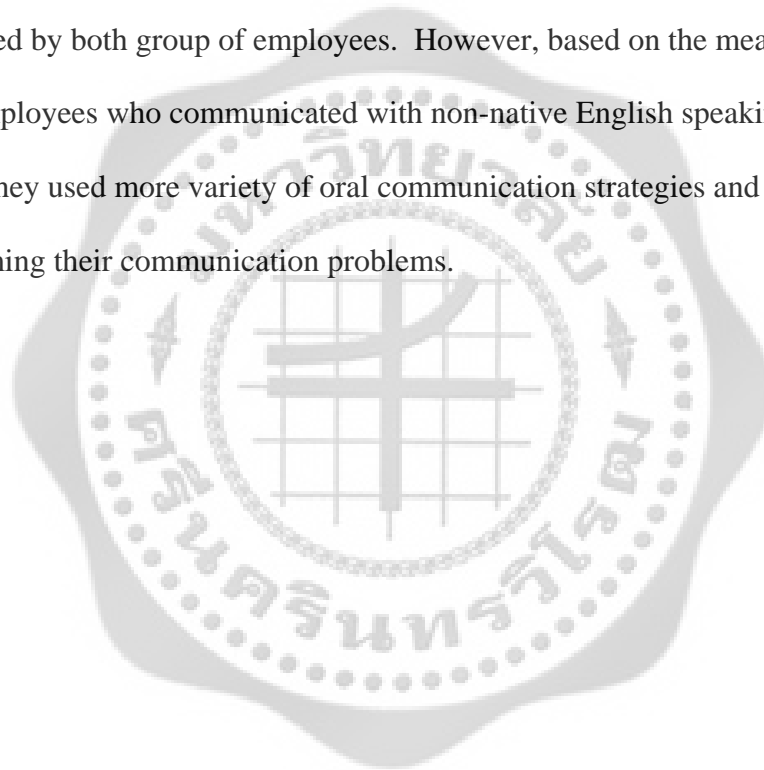
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER

STUDIES

Research Questions 1 and 2

1. What were the English oral communication problems encountered by Thai employees who communicated with native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

2. What were the English oral communication problems encountered by Thai employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

Results: Research Questions 1 and 2.

The results revealed that Thai employees communicating with native English speaking customers encountered three problems at moderate level of agreement out of the 21 problems (15%) listed in the questionnaire. The problems they encountered the most included (a) having trouble with listening comprehension when foreign customers spoke too fast, (b) producing grammatical errors when speaking, and (c) trouble during telephone calls.

On the other hand, the Thai employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers encountered a wider variety of problems than the first group. This group encountered 14 of the 21 problems (60%). The most critical problem for this group was listening comprehension. They were unable to understand expressions accurately when foreign customers spoke English too quickly, especially over the phone. Moreover, they also had problems in terms of grammar usage. These problems included producing grammatical errors while speaking, including the inability to use the plural forms of

nouns and the forms of verb tenses correctly. The employees also encountered problems such as difficulties understanding foreign accents, insufficient knowledge of the cultural background of their customers, low fluency, trouble regulating the volume of their voice, poor or insufficient vocabulary, and poor pronunciation.

Discussion: Research Questions 1 & 2.

Both groups of Thai customer service employees perceived that they encountered problems during English oral communication with their foreign customers. Obviously, the results were consistent with the study of Forey and Lockwood (2007), which indicated that non-native English speakers working as agents in a customer service or call center context had problems communicating in English. However, the results of this study revealed that the group of employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers agreed that they had more serious problems than the group who communicated with native English speaking customers. The most common problems found in both groups were listening comprehension and grammar usage. Moreover, the employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers also had problems understanding foreign accents, low fluency in spoken English, insufficient knowledge of the cultural background of their customers, trouble regulating the volume of their voice, and word stress misplacement.

One plausible reason for these problems could be because of an insufficient practice in oral communication. As the participants were Thai speakers, they had limited exposure to and experience with English interaction, especially with foreigners, even though they had studied English for more than eight years (Boonkit, 2010).

Another reason may be related to the typical pattern of teaching and learning English as a Second Language in many Thai public schools, which mainly focuses on competence in grammar rather than competence in oral communication. The final plausible reason

may be the overuse of the Thai language in the English classroom as the majority of Thai teachers use the Thai language as one of their main tools to teach English to Thai students. As a result, Thai teachers are competent in English grammar, but can barely speak the language. In order to rectify these problems, it can be seen that many Thai parents send their children to private English institutes, where more emphasis is placed on speaking.

The results of this study were consistent with previous studies (Boonkit, 2010; Jaisutthi, 2006; Khamkaew, 2009; Tipmontree, 2007; Vasavakul, 2006) related to English oral communication problems encountered by Thai speakers. The most common problems were (a) listening comprehension, (b) grammatical errors, (c) limited vocabulary, (d) being unable to understand different foreign accents, (e) low fluency, (f) difficulties in pronunciation, (g) a lack of cultural awareness, (h) and a lack of self-confidence. However, the results of this study also demonstrated that the English oral communication problems of both groups were not at a critical stage because none of the participants strongly agreed with the problems stated in the questionnaire. The fact that the participants did not strongly disagree with the problems stated in the questionnaire also indicated the mediocrity of the problems encountered by these employees, who were not functioning at a high level nor experiencing a high level of difficulty.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there is still opportunity for these employees to improve their English oral communication skills to be more effective. In order to overcome these problems, Thai employees should have more opportunities to practice their English oral communication skills. Additionally, English training courses with an emphasis on listening and speaking skills and customized for each working environment would be beneficial for Thai employees (Vasavakul, 2006). Another suggestion by Boonkit (2010) to improve the oral communication skills of Thai employees is frequent listening to authentic English materials, including listening to music, watching movies,

listening to the radio, watching television, accessing multimedia websites, and seeking opportunities to speak in daily life. An increased level of exposure to English and more practice with real world listening and speaking situations can promote fluency and confidence at the same time (Boonkit, 2010).

Moreover, the company should provide English training courses in oral communication that correspond with common problems experienced by employees so that they can function more effectively in daily communication with foreign customers. Also, Thai English teachers should put more emphasis on a practical curriculum to develop and enhance oral communication skills so that Thai speakers can have more practice and exposure to both listening and speaking activities in real world situations. This could lead to Thai speakers using their oral communication skills more effectively, as well as increasing their levels of fluency and confidence.

Research Questions 3 and 4

3. What were the strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

4. What were the strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with non-native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

Results: Research Questions 3 and 4.

The results revealed that both groups of Thai employees used both achievement strategies and avoidance strategies. In comparing the two strategies, it was found that both groups agreed that they employed achievement strategies with a higher level of agreement than avoidance strategies to overcome their English oral communication problems. The most commonly used achievement strategies employed by both groups were (a) directly asking their customers what they did not understand (b) seeking a

clarification request, (c) making something explicit through paraphrasing, (d) making generalizations by using general words or terms.

In addition, it was found that the group of employees communicating with non-native English speaking customers utilized almost all of the achievement strategies listed in the questionnaire. Furthermore, when they had difficulties during communication with foreign customers, both groups also used avoidance or reduction strategies, which were (a) focusing on key words, and (b) changing the topic when they felt that they did not have enough knowledge or failed to understand their customers.

Research Question 5

5. Was there a significant difference between the strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with native English speaking customers and non-native English speaking customers in an international workplace based in Bangkok?

Results: Research Question 5.

It was found that there was no significant difference between the strategies used by Thai employees to communicate with native English speaking customers and those used to communicate with non-native English speaking customers. These results suggested that both groups of employees used almost exactly the same oral communication strategies when communicating with foreign customers or when facing oral communication problems with their customers. However, employees communicating with non-native English speaking customers rated at a higher level of agreement with the use of oral communication strategies and put more effort into overcoming communication problems.

Discussion: Research Questions 3, 4, and 5.

Based on the data found in the study, both groups of Thai employees utilized several strategies from both the achievement or compensatory strategies and the avoidance or reduction strategies at the same moderate level of agreement. The Thai employees in this study, whether they communicated with native English speaking or non-native English speaking customers, showed similar patterns in their use of oral communication strategies. No significant differences were found between the oral communication strategies used by both groups of employees. It is worth noting that even employees who communicated with native English speaking customers and perceived themselves as having fewer critical problems with English oral communication employed similar strategies to those used by the second group. This finding was similar to those of Bygate (2002), who claimed that communication strategies were also used to enhance the effectiveness of communication even if there were no problems involved in the interaction.

Moreover, the findings also indicate that the Thai employees in this study used achievement or compensatory strategies at a higher level of agreement than avoidance or reduction strategies. It should be noted that during communication, Thai employees resolved communication problems by appealing to their customers for help, paraphrasing messages, and using general words or terms in order to enhance understanding. This indicates that they had strong intentions to achieve communication goals rather than abandon their attempts to communicate.

In addition, both of these groups of employees also used the technique of approximation, or using another word with a similar meaning, and circumlocution, or using indirect words or roundabout expressions to understand their customers and ensure smoother communication. This showed a high level of confidence and a willingness to

run communication effectively and to ensure collaborative communication with customers in a multilingual setting (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Although the overall pattern of communication strategies turned out to be similar for both groups of Thai employees, the employees who communicated with non-native English speaking customers tended to use strategies more seriously than the first group did. The higher scale of the level of agreement regarding the use of oral communication strategies could be because the customers they communicated with were from different non-native English speaking countries. They also encountered a variety of more critical problems during interaction. Consequently, this led them to seek alternative ways to successfully communicate with foreign customers and to struggle more with oral communication problems. However, it is worth noting that most of them did not abandon their attempts to communicate, indicating a strong intention to achieve communication goals.

To conclude, the results could be implied that overall the Thai employees of this international company were competent communicators. They could overcome several communication problems with the use of effective oral communication strategies. According to Savignon (1983), the effective use of coping strategies is important for communicators in all contexts and also distinguishes highly competent communicators from less competent communicators.

Conclusion and Implications

The Thai employees, whether they communicated with native or non-native English speaking customers, all experienced some problems with English oral communication. The major problems they encountered were with listening comprehension and grammar usage. However, the groups of employees communicating with non-native English speaking customers rated a higher level of agreement regarding the English oral

communication problems than the group communicating with native English speaking customers. It can be assumed that the employees communicating with non-native English speaking customers had limited knowledge of English and a limited exposure to English interaction with the authentic sources.

Although the employees encountered problems during these interactions, they made attempts to achieve their communication goals as can be seen from several uses of oral communication strategies. Both groups of Thai employees used several strategies, including achievement strategies and avoidance or reduction strategies. These results showed that in English oral communication situations with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, Thai speakers used oral communication strategies in order to establish effective communication. Therefore, the English oral communication competence of the Thai employees should be improved so that Thai employees can compete in the challenging ASEAN economic community as well as participate in the broader international community.

To improve the level of English oral communication proficiency of Thai speakers or learners, it is important for both public and private academic sectors to seriously focus on the exact and existing problems of the speakers or learners so that the training course and curriculum can be customized and matched with the speakers' or learners' problems the most. Also, it is suggested that Thai English teachers can play an important role in raising learners' consciousness and encouraging their learners to make the most effective use of oral communication strategies to tackle with communication difficulties. Both learners and teachers should be noted that communication strategies are parts of the language use and the using of communication strategies is not an indication of communication failure, but it can enhance the communicative effectiveness. Hence, by learning and practicing the use of oral communication strategies appropriately, the level

of self-confidence and English oral communication proficiency of the Thai learners may improve.

Recommendation for further Studies

Some recommendations for further studies were presented as follows:

1. In order to gain more reliable information, further studies should be conducted to collect customers' feedback so that the data can be compared.

2. A qualitative study using real recorded scripts of the communication between the customer-service employees and customers should be conducted in order to obtain in-depth data and more reliable information.

3. Further studies should be conducted with larger samples and a larger variety of international organizations so that the results will be more generalized.
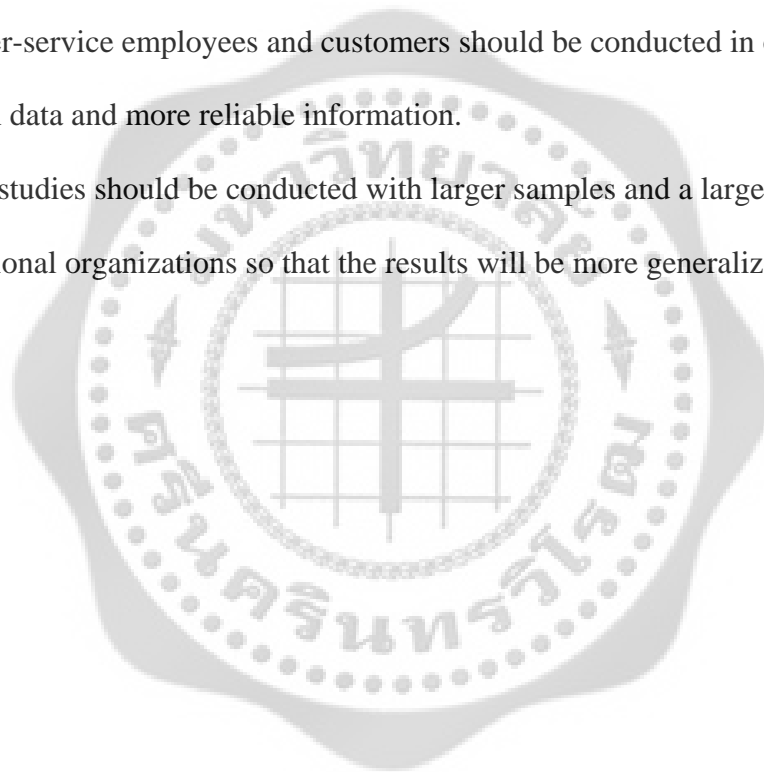
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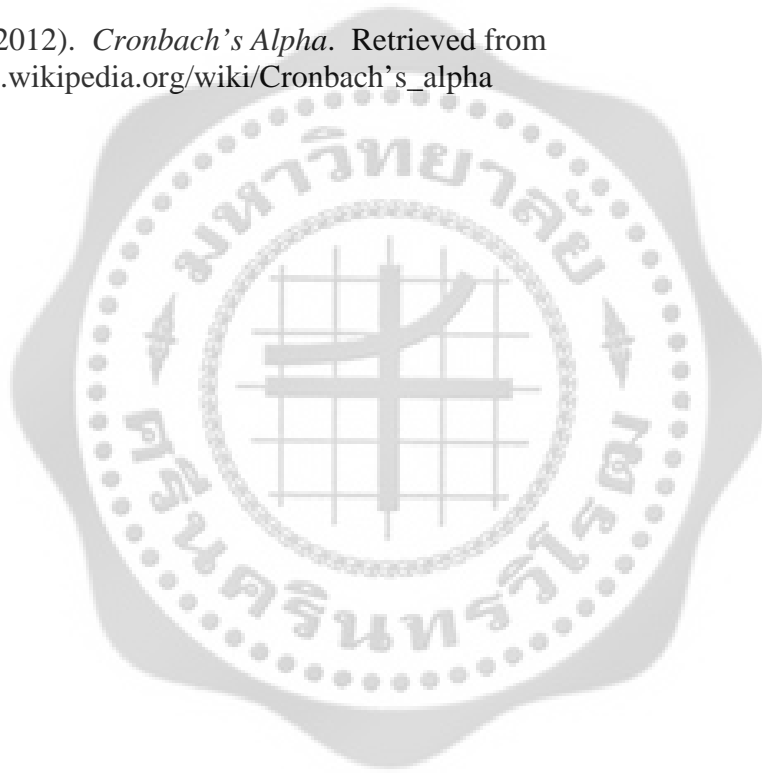
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

LETTER ASKING FOR PARTICIPATION

February 1, 2012

Dear all participants

My name is Fatimah Jeharsae. I am studying in a Master's Program in English at Srinakarinwirot University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study entitled "English Oral Communication Problems and Strategies Used by Thai Employees in an International Workplace to Communicate with Native and Non-Native English Speaking Customers."

In this study, a questionnaire will be used as an instrument to collect data. Therefore, you will be asked to complete the questionnaire. All information will only be used for the purpose of the study. The demographic and opinion data will be treated as confidential and will be destroyed after the completion of this study.

Your willingness to participate in this study would be highly appreciated. Please use the following form to indicate your willingness to participate in this study. Please return the form to me (FJE-VTT#20) by February 16, 2012. If you have any enquiry, please feel free to contact me at Ext#5161 or at fatimah.jeharsae@live.com. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Sincerely yours,

Fatimah Jeharsae (FJE)

My name is_____

☐   I am willing to participate in Fatimah Jeharsae's study.

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE

Research Questionnaire

English Oral Communication Problems and Strategies Used by Thai Employees in an International Workplace to Communicate with Native and Non-Native English Speaking Customers

This purpose of this survey questionnaire is to investigate English oral communication problems and strategies used by Thai-customer service employees in an international workplace to communicate with native and non-native English speaking customers. The information you provide will be used only for the academic purposes of this study and will not be provided to anyone else. It will also be destroyed on the completion of this study.

Please complete this survey questionnaire according to your English oral communication problems and the strategies used to overcome the problems. Your cooperation in completing this questionnaire is greatly appreciated. Upon completion, please return this survey to FJE-VTT#20 by February 16, 2012.

Should you have any further enquiries regarding the questionnaire or this study, please feel free to contact me at FJE – Ext.5161. Thank you.

Sincerely yours,

Fatimah   Jeharsae (FJE)

Part I: Demographic Data

Instructions: Please answer all questions below by marking a check (✓) for your answer or writing your answers in the space provided.

1. Please indicate your gender.

   ☐　　Male　　　　☐　　　Female

2. How long have you been working with this company?

   ☐　　Less than 1 year　　☐　　2 - 3 years　　☐　　4 - 5 years

   ☐　　More than 6 years

3. Please indicate your current Function/Division in current department.

   ☐　　Customer Support　　　　☐　　Order/ Delivery

   ☐　　Customer Relations　　　　☐　　Marine/Aviation Support

   ☐　　Control & Operation Support　☐　　Others, please specify………

4. What country are you responsible for? (Please select only ONE country of your primary responsibility)

   Non-native English Speaking countries:

   ☐　　Malaysia　　☐　　Singapore　　☐　　Hong Kong

   ☐　　Japan　　☐　　Thailand　　☐　　Others, please specify………

   Native English Speaking countries:

   ☐　　Australia　　☐　　New Zealand　☐　　The United States

   ☐　　The United Kingdom　　　☐　　Others, please specify……………….

Part II: Problems in English Oral Communication

Instructions: Please answer all questions below by marking a check (✓) for each statement that most accurately reflects the level of your agreement with each of the following English oral communication problems.

(5 = Strongly Agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Moderately Agree, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly Disagree)

Problems in English Oral Communication	Level of Agreement				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Moderately Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Listening comprehension					
1. I have trouble understanding speech during telephone calls.					
2. I do not understand words or sentences when foreign customers speak English too fast.					
3. I do not know when to pay close attention when listening to calls from customers.					
4. I have trouble with accuracy when listening to customers on the phone.					
Fluency					
5. I have low fluency in spoken English.					
6. I pause too long when speaking English.					
7. I understand, but I am unable to respond.					
Grammar					
8. I produce grammatical errors when speaking.					
9. I do not use the plural form of the noun correctly.					
10. I do not use the correct forms of verb tenses. (i.e. present, past, future tenses)					

Problems in English Oral Communication	Level of Agreement				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Moderately Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Vocabulary					
11. I respond with inappropriate words.					
12. I have poor or insufficient vocabulary (few choices of words).					
Others					
- Cultural Awareness 13. I lack or have insufficient cultural background or knowledge of the customers' countries.					
- Self-Confidence 14. I have low confidence and experience nervousness when speaking English.					
- Accents 15. I have trouble understanding foreign accents.					
- Pronunciation 16. I produce word stress misplacements.					
17. I speak with poor English pronunciation.					
- Quality of Voice 18. I have trouble regulating the volume of my voice. (I speak too loudly or too softly)					
19. I speak so quickly that my listeners cannot keep up.					
20. I speak so slowly that people lose interest.					
21. I mumble when speaking since I cannot say or pronounce each consonant clearly.					

22. Other Problems in English Oral Communication (Please specify.)

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Part III: Strategies to Cope with Problems in English Oral Communication

Instructions: Please answer all questions below by marking a check (✓) for each statement that most accurately reflects the level of your agreement with each of the following ways to cope with your English oral communication problems.

(5 = Strongly Agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Moderately Agree, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly Disagree)

In case you have difficulties while communicating with foreign customers or you do not understand what your foreign customers said, what do you do?

Communication Strategies	Level of Agreement				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Moderately Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Achievement or Compensatory Strategies					
1. I ask customers to spell words that I do not catch.					
2. I ask customers to use easy words.					
3. I ask customers to repeat themselves in a louder voice.					
4. I ask customers to speak more slowly.					
5. I repeat words or phrases with a system of tones. (Rise, Fall)					
6. I make a clarification request.					
7. I directly ask my customers for what I do not get.					
8. I try to translate it into my first language word for word.					
9. I ask my colleagues to help translate for me.					
10. I use a dictionary to translate unfamiliar words.					
11. I use indirect words or roundabout expressions to get the customers' messages.					
12. I use another language e.g. Malay, Chinese for words or expressions that I do not know how to say in English.					

Communication Strategies	Level of Agreement				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Moderately Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Achievement or Compensatory Strategies					
13. I make up my own new English words to replace the word that I do not know exactly what is called in English.					
14. I use general words or terms with my customers.					
15. I try to paraphrase or talk in a different way with equivalent to or the same meaning to confirm my understanding with customers.					
16. I try to use another word that means almost the same with what customers said, e.g. animal for horse.					
Avoidance or Reduction Strategies					
17. I change the topic when I feel that I do not have enough knowledge or understood the customer.					
18. I only focus on key words to get the overall message.					
19. I only pay attention to what I have understood.					
20. I pretend to understand the message.					

21. Others (Please specify.)……………………….………………………………………....

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Thank you very much for your great participation.

VITAE

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Place of Birth: Pattani

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2012   Master of Arts (English),

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